[redacted]'s Famous Stag Dinners

I wonder if it would be convenient for you to come to an informal stag dinner . . . I suggest that we meet at the White House about half past seven, have a reasonably early dinner and devote the evening to a general chat. While I am hopeful that you can attend, I realize that you already may have engagements which would interfere. If so, I assure you of my complete understanding. I shall probably wear a dinner coat but a business suit will be entirely appropriate. With warm personal regards,

Dwight D. Eisenhower

This is the way the President issues an invitation to a new institution on the national scene—the White House stag dinner. Since June 8 of last year, more than 500 such letters have summoned to the White House the most heterogeneous—and the most influential—assortment of men who ever came to dinner anywhere. This week the dinners were resumed after a two-month lapse.

Andrew Jackson had his Kitchen Cabinet, Theodore Roosevelt his Tennis Cabinet, and Herbert Hoover his Medicine-ball Cabinet. F.D.R. had his Brain Trust and Harry Truman his Missouri cronies.

These groups were made up of Presidential favorites, often operating as a palace guard. But Mr. Eisenhower has no Golf Cabinet. Instead, he has created a private forum where an ever-revolving cast of top leaders, often with drastically divergent opinions, preoccupations, and backgrounds, converge from all sections of the country to talk and listen.

Food for Men: From start to finish each dinner is a personal Presidential affair. He selects much of the guest list. Each guest gets a personal invitation three or four weeks ahead. Each is personally greeted by the host and introduced to others upon arrival. The menu is built on Mr. Eisenhower's idea that men like a male meal. Its chief ingredient: Texas chuckers* with wild rice.

On the dinner table are color photos of a chucker in its natural glory ("This is the bird you'll be eating," says the President.) Next to each hand-lettered, gold-bordered place card with the Presidential seal lies a small, brown pen knife which, at many of the dinners, bears the initials "D.D.E." and the current month and year. Attached to another card is a shiny new penny.

Before each party sits down to dinner, the President reminds his guests (numbering from thirteen to 22) of the superstition that a cutting-edge gift must never be accepted without token payment.*

"You've got to give me the penny back," says the President.

Amid chuckling, the pennies are passed across the table, which is rectangular, with the President sitting at the center of one side, as in Cabinet meetings, to permit a free flow of talk.

One night, Laurance, David, and Winthrop Rockefeller were among the guests and one of them protested the return of the penny. The Rockefellers, he announced, never give money back. Smilingly, all three pocketed their pennies as souvenirs. Others confess having done the same thing quietly.

Informality is the keynote of the parties. Tax commissioner T. Coleman Andrews, invited on March 16, kidded the President about not having seen his income-tax return, which is the only one to cross the commissioner's desk. Like any taxpayer, the President protested that he had sent off his check long ago.

Nothing is made public about these gatherings except the guest lists, yet the dinners are of incalculable significance because the President uses them to:

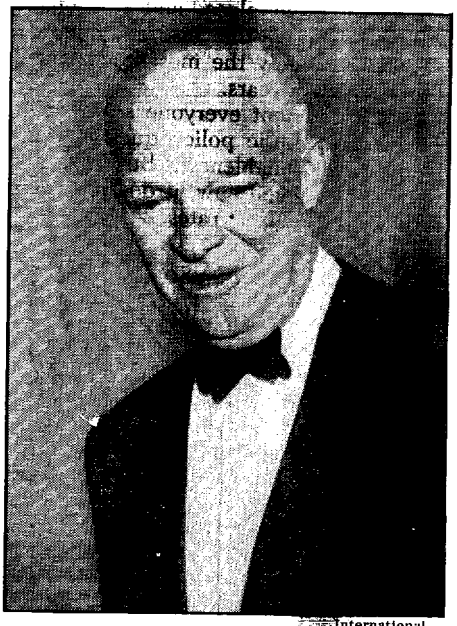
▶Relax from the tensions of his job and speak freely.

▶Inform himself of the country's thinking as mirrored by top opinion-makers and old friends.

▶Test out his ideas on men who are discreet but frank.

The guests, who frequently don't know each other but usually go on a first-name basis within minutes, amount to a Who's

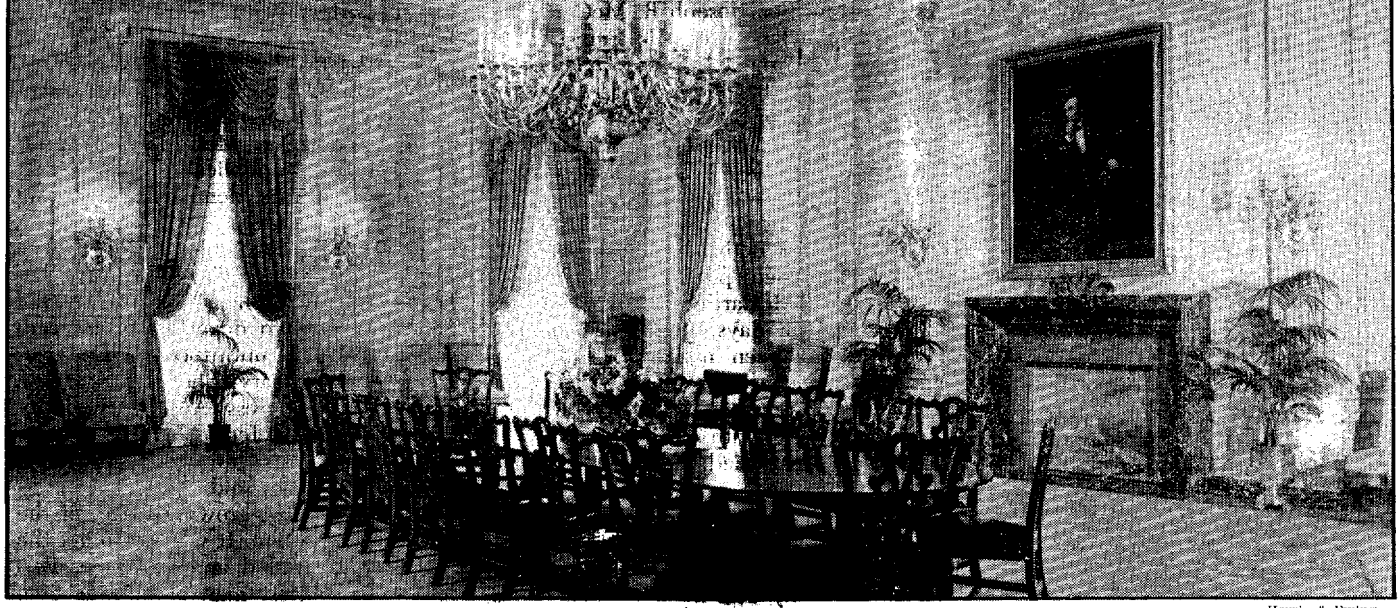
*This belief traces back to an English proverb: "Do not make a present of a knife for it will cut love."



International

*This game bird is a broad-breasted, Texas-raised version of the Himalayan pheasant. Other standard stag dishes: Turtle soup, salmon, light wine, green [illegible]

. . . Who Gets Invited, Why, and What Happens



Harris & Ewing

From one side of this state dining table (here set up for eighteen) the President can talk with all his guests

Who in America: Top officials of the largest corporations and labor unions; musical headliners like Irving Berlin and Fred Waring; university presidents; Hollywood lights like Darryl Zanuck and George Murphy; publishers of leading newspapers and magazines; religious spokesmen like Francis Cardinal Spellman and Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver, and sports headliners like football coaches Earl Blaik and Lou Little.

These potent conversational ingredients are vigorously shaken before use.

Around the Table: John L. Lewis rubbed shoulders with Sid Richardson, the Texas oil millionaire; J.P. Morgan's George Whitney dined with the United Steelworkers' David McDonald; golf pro Ed Dudley was invited with Central Intelligence Agency Director Allen Dulles; Alfred Gwynne Vanderbilt attended with Marty Snyder, the President's mess sergeant at SHAEF, who now heads a boneless-turkey business; Bishop Fulton J. Sheen mixed with top men from General Motors.

Among the business leaders who have attended the meetings are: Morehead Patterson, chairman, American Machine & Foundry Co.; James D. Zellerbach, president, Crown Zellerbach Corp.; George W. Merck, board chairman, Merck & Co.; Ralph S. Damon, president, Trans World Airlines, Inc.; Barry T. Leithead, president, Cluett, Peabody, & Co., Inc.; J. Sayles Leach, board chairman, the Texas Co.; and Ralph T. Reed, president, American Express Co.

There have been 32 stag dinners, but only a handful of intimates, like Gen. Lucius D. Clay and Walter Bedell Smith and Dr. Milton Eisenhower, have been invited twice or more.

Famous or obscure, most guests are drawn into the parties by just two common denominators:

They know and like their host (though nearly all call him "Mr. President") and they're not "yes men."

Mr. Eisenhower does his best to create the relaxed air that encourages the give-and-take discussion he enjoys most. Wives are kept out [illegible] their presence, it is felt, might [illegible] to make the parties more formal.

Guided Tour: Like any skillful host, the President may loosen things up by explaining the swords, paintings, and other mementoes on the walls of his study. Sometimes he guides guests through historic White House spots, complimenting Mr. Truman on his taste in the face-lifting of the mansion.

[illegible] President may question guests c[illegible] the guests fire questions b[illegible]

Some evenings, Mr. Eisenhower may dominate the talk with briefings, perhaps about the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's role as a Western bulwark or whether our relations with Mexico should not be as close as those with Canada.

Never does the President [illegible] the impression of pumping [illegible] "He didn't make us feel that [illegible] barometers for him," says one), but often he will throw a phrase into a discussion to liven it up. The more heated the argument, the better he likes it.

Many a famous guest has opened up with his own high-powered conversational artillery. Chrysler's K.T. Keller discussed guided missiles; John W. Davis, the great Constitutional lawyer and Democratic candidate for President in 1924, offered his comments on the Bricker amendment; Harvard's Nathan Pusey expounded on education.

Candor: The President has occasionally been quite frank in venting his frustration with the ways of politics. Musing about the Lincoln portrait in the state dining room, he observed that he had been reading up on Lincoln and noted that even the Great Emancipator had to make some painful political compromises.

Sometimes friends feel compelled to lighten the Presidential burden with jokes (though never risqué ones, which the President dislikes).

Inevitably, visitors are impressed with the President's curiosity, memory, and remarkable storehouse of information. He asked Alfred Vanderbilt whether Native Dancer would go to Europe. With Frank Leahy there was football talk and the President recalled the scores of the games he played as a West Point Cadet and many individual plays. A guest who listened to his off-the-[illegible]mate of foreign-trade problems [illegible]:

"I thought I knew [illegible]bout the question, but the Presid[illegible]d twenty or 25 minutes and covered [illegible]d so thoroughly that Craft inspired to work harder among businessmen."

On Time: The parties always start at 7:30 and the guests are always prompt. As they enter the White House through the center door, their names are checked against the guest list and they are shown a chart with the seating arrangements so no one need hunt for his place. Despite

the wording of [illegible] guest has ever shown up in a business suit. (Once, the President had to deliver a television talk in the evening, and also wore a business suit to dinner.)

Mr. Eisenhower welcomes guests upstairs in his study. There may or may not be cocktails before dinner, but the meal is at 8 o'clock and lasts about an hour and a half. Coffee, cordials, cigars, and highballs are served later in the study.

Washington parties traditionally break up early and the stags close down between 11 and midnight.

Few Interruptions: At his best in such casual (and almost never interrupted) get-togethers, Mr. Eisenhower rarely moves to break them up. Usually a guest signals the end by saying, "We shouldn't keep the President up" or "You've been kind to us, Mr. President, I know you want to get to bed." Sometimes the host is reluctant. Says one caller: "We all knew that Churchill was due the next day and we tried to get away reasonably early, but he even had us sit down when we got up to leave."

Only once did the President slap his thigh and say: "Golly, I guess tomorrow's a workday for you as well as me, so we'd better break this up." But sometimes he suggests "one for the road."

Like any host after a pleasant evening, the President walks his company to the door and shakes hands all around.

Almost invariably, the guests depart glowing. One guest later summed it up: "It's one of the most delightful and constructive evenings a man can have.